

The Hopkins 1676 Hamlet Prompt Book

Sheridan Libraries, Johns Hopkins University

This volume constitutes one of only three known 17th-century annotated “prompt books” of Shakespeare’s longest play, *Hamlet*, that have survived to the present day. The earliest, the so-called “Smock Alley Hamlet,” named after the Dublin theater where it was performed, is located at the University of Edinburgh. It derives from the 1663 Third Folio edition of the collected plays, which was broken up, and the plays bound separately, by the Shakespeare scholar J. O. Halliwell-Phillipps before his donation of his Shakespeare collection to the University Library in Edinburgh. It may have been annotated as early as 1680. The other copy, now at the Folger Shakespeare Library, is a marked up copy of the 1683 quarto. Like the Johns Hopkins 1676 *Hamlet* prompt book, the Folger quarto was annotated, by the same actor, and in quite similar ways, for another performance of the play.

The present 1676 *Hamlet* prompt book is part of the collections of the Sheridan Libraries of Johns Hopkins University. It was purchased by the Friends of the Libraries at the behest of the leading scholar of surviving Shakespeare prompt books J. G. McManaway and added to the collection of the Tudor and Stuart Club of the university. It is currently located in the John Work Garrett Library at the Evergreen Museum & Library, one of the Sheridan Libraries.

The Hopkins prompt book (like the Folger Library’s copy) is known to have been annotated by the little known English actor John Ward (d. 1773), a man perhaps most distinguished, not by his own theatrical career, but by those of his legendary grandchildren, Sarah Siddons and John Philip Kemble. Siddons was arguably the most famous tragedienne ever to have played the role of Lady Macbeth—a character that she performed alongside her equally famous younger brother Kemble on the English stage. Largely based on the evidence of Ward’s handwriting, the annotations in the Hopkins prompt book are believed to have been entered sometime shortly after 1740 for a uniquely tailored, and much abbreviated, performance of the play. An additional, and apparently later, hand appears on page 76 and again on page 88, though the notes made by this second annotator do not provide any additional interpretive information about the play. Unfortunately the upper portion of one page, representing a portion of Act 5, Scene 2 has been torn and lost, though the original printed text is otherwise completely intact.

The manuscript annotations consist of stage and prop directions (“Long trap open, earth, skulls and bones in it” is written at the beginning of Act 5, for example), lists of the names of characters meant to enter or exit the stage at a given time, as well as very large cancellations (perhaps as much as one third of Acts 2 and 4 are simply crossed out) of Shakespeare’s original text. There are also a handful of original contributions to the printed text that appear to have been authored by Ward himself. In other cases, various lines have simply been reassigned to other characters, though the effect does not seem to substantially alter the dramatic action of the play. Indeed, this was very much a working copy, as is evidenced in Ward’s further cancellations of entire handwritten lines that he had initially added to the imprint (pp. 32, 64, 80, &c.).

A number of the manuscript revisions of Shakespeare's original language simply alter the order of the sentences such as in one of Ward's annotations in Act 3, where the line "Shews sick and pale with thought," was changed to "Is sick with the pale cast of thought." Later, at Hamlet's death, Horatio's familiar line, "Now crack a noble heart, good night sweet prince," was altered to read "There cracked the cordage of a noble heart." On balance, these adjustments are minimal, and most often appear as minor adjustments to compensate for any potential confusion or resulting infelicities of prose caused by Ward's cancelled portions of the original printed text.

The most substantial alterations of the content of Shakespeare's original text consist, therefore, of those portions of the printed original that have been cancelled outright by Ward, such as his almost complete deletion of Polonius' famous speech of fatherly advice to his son, Laertes, in Act 1, Scene 3, and Hamlet's own soliloquy on drink in Act 1, Scene 4. Polonius's dialogue with Reynaldo at the beginning of Act 2, Scene 1 was completely cancelled and significant portions of Hamlet's greeting to the players, as well as his subsequent recollection of one of the visiting players' earlier speeches delivered on the Fall of Troy in Act 2 were also omitted from Ward's performance. Another of Hamlet's soliloquies in Act 4 ("How all occasions inform against me") was also entirely cancelled by Ward, as was Hamlet's lengthy exchange with Horatio about his plot to kill Rosencrantz and Guildenstern at the beginning of Act 5, Scene 1. Perhaps most dramatic of all was Ward's decision to truncate the tumultuous closing scene of the play, which was shortened substantially. Fortinbras' closing announcement of the deaths of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, and his subsequent exchange with Horatio, were completely excised, causing the play to end immediately, and violently, upon the moment of Hamlet's death.

Of all the characters, the one whose role was most diminished by these cancellations of the printed original was clearly that of the King, many of whose most lengthy speeches were methodically shortened or simply deleted. The general effect of this much reduced presence of Hamlet's stepfather on the stage is that of a more indifferent, abstract and essentially immoral King, as well as a corresponding enhancement of the royal presence of the Queen and the importance of her relationship to her son as a source of dramatic tension and conflict.

As an historical artifact which can be placed squarely within the context of the mid 18th-century stage revival and literary apotheosis of Shakespeare as the prince of English poets and playwrights, the Hopkins prompt book provides a unique and intensely revealing insight into the instability of the Shakespeare canon, both under the exigencies of stage performance and through the transformation of literary taste and sensibilities over time.

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Bibliography

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G. Blakemore Evans (ed.), *Shakespearean Prompt-books of the Seventeenth Century*, 8 vols. (Charlottesville, VA: Bibliographical Society of the University of Virginia, 1960-). See also: <http://etext.virginia.edu/bsuva/promptbook/index.html>

E. A. J. Honigmann, *The Stability of Shakespeare's Text* (Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 1965)

[Microfilm Series:] *Shakespeare and the Stage*. Series one, Prompt books from the Folger Shakespeare Library, Washington, D.C., 86 microfilm reels; Series 2, Prompt books from the Harvard Theatre Collection, 36 microfilm reels; Series 3, The Shakespeare Library Collection, Birmingham Public Library, 10 microfilm reels; Series 4, Prompt books from the Shakespeare Centre Library, Stratford-upon-Avon, 85 microfilm reels (Woodbridge, CT: Research Publications, 1985; Reading, Eng.: Research Publications, 1988; Brighton: Harvester, 1986; Brighton, Eng.: Harvester Microform, 1987)